



State, Society & Governance in Melanesia

Celebrating 20 years of SSGM and 70 years of Pacific studies at The Australian National University

An Unlikely Alliance: Training NRL ‘Cultural Warriors’

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Since 2012 the National Rugby League (NRL) Welfare and Education department has collaborated with the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program (SSGM) on delivering the NRL Pasifika Cultural Engagement Program. Although an unlikely alliance, there is strong rationale for the partnership based on a shared vision of improving the social lives of Pacific communities both in the region and Australia. Athletes of Pacific heritage represent 42 per cent of all athletes in the NRL competition, with most Pasifika¹ athletes either New Zealand (52 per cent) or Australian (37 per cent) born.² Given these demographics, the NRL Welfare and Education department recognises the value and importance of Pacific studies and cultural leadership programs while SSGM appreciates the NRL's unique position to highlight Pacific issues. This In Brief outlines some of the collaborative projects between SSGM and NRL under the NRL Pasifika Cultural Engagement Program.

NRL Pasifika Cultural Engagement Program Overview

This program highlights the significance of educating young men, and the sporting industry, on the importance of understanding, engaging and developing Pacific cultures within rugby league. Most participants are players demonstrating leadership potential within the NRL and their clubs or are recently retired and working with the NRL. The inaugural project, ‘Body Pacifica Exhibition’, was a collaboration between photographer Greg Semu and the Casula Powerhouse in Sydney in 2010. The collaboration began with the ‘Body on the Line, Cultural Warriors’ exhibition that showcased 13 Pasifika athletes in Pacific body adornment pieces who wanted to demonstrate their cultural pride and connectedness to Pacific communities. The exhibition subsequently won a New South Wales art award and became [a fundraising calendar](#).

During this project it became evident that athletes were not always comfortable with being a ‘cultural warrior’. One athlete withdrew on the day of the shoot as he felt he did not

understand his culture well enough to be publicly recognised as a ‘cultural warrior’. Club coaches and administrators also had difficulties motivating Pasifika athletes to join player leadership groups. On further investigation, athletes explained they were uncomfortable being leaders in any group if they weren't leaders in their own Pacific communities and couldn't speak confidently about their Pacific culture. This presented a challenge, particularly as elite athletes are inevitably role models for Pacific and non-Pacific communities.

With the success of Pasifika athletes in rugby league more young Pasifika males aspire to become like their rugby league heroes. This has led to young Pasifika males focusing solely on sport to the detriment of their education, leaving them vulnerable if they are unable to secure one of the few NRL contracts available every year. Furthermore, Pasifika athletes are less likely than any other ethnic group to participate in the tertiary or vocational opportunities that are available to all NRL athletes.²

The number of Pasifika athletes continues to rise and the trend is likely to continue for the next few years.² However, across the game less than 2 per cent of all coaches and administrators are of Pasifika heritage. These issues initiated a series of NRL and SSGM projects with Pasifika athletes.

Pacific Leadership Camps

In 2012 the ANU NRL Pacific Studies Cultural Leadership Camp was held in Sydney. The purpose was to empower NRL elite Pasifika athletes and ex-athletes to become leaders in their respective clubs, communities and rugby league. Using cultural and educational empowerment tools, this camp provided foundational Pacific studies knowledge. Six months after the camp, an impact assessment evaluated athletes' leadership skills once back in the regular season with their clubs. The findings were overall positive. Most athletes noted it improved their leadership skills and helped to reconnect with their cultural heritage. This was important for their personal development, especially for those raised in Australia.

The second project in 2012 was the 'Leaders of the Pac' conference for elite junior Pacific athletes in New South Wales. This one-day conference was based on a recommendation from an athlete who attended the first camp and recognised the value and importance of mentoring younger Pacific athletes in school competitions.

In 2014 the second NRL Pasifika leadership camp was held in Sydney. Unlike the first camp, the focus was solely on developing participants' leadership, problem solving and coping skills by using Pacific culturally appropriate tools developed by the Le Va group from New Zealand in response to well-publicised mental health issues and suicide of Pasifika athletes. Participants said that the practical advice given on problem solving and coping would better enable them to help fellow athletes, particularly younger athletes with wellbeing issues.

Pacific Studies

In 2013, 20 NRL staff and players participated in the [Navigating Pacific Studies online course](#) offered by SSGM and the ANU College of Asia & the Pacific. All players were of Pacific heritage, while staff included both Pacific and non-Pacific members. This 8-week course provided an introduction to Pacific Studies. The course also helped build Pacific cross-cultural competencies for non-Pacific staff. Sixteen staff and players successfully completed the course. All participants recommended that the course be available to any player or staff member; however, in its current format it would be difficult for athletes to complete due to playing commitments.

In 2014 the [NRL Pasifika Academic Excellence Award](#) was launched. This award provides a 10-day student-athlete experience at the University of California, Los Angeles, for two Pasifika players who have demonstrated excellence at NRL level, academic pursuits and Pasifika community outreach. The award is designed to further develop these athletes by broadening their perspectives on Pacific migrant communities globally. This includes working with the Pacific Islander Education and Retention Program to generate ideas and educational equity solutions for Pacific communities. Based on the success of the initiative the NRL launched the same award for Indigenous Australian athletes in 2015.

Contributing to Pacific Development

Athletes are often used for sports-for-development by organisations and governments to promote social messaging and development projects. However, they are rarely given the opportunity to contribute to program design nor are they

always fully informed about what exactly they are lending their personal brand to (Murray 2013). This approach needs to change to enable sustainable relationships between athletes and programs that can lead to more effective programming. This argument forms the basis of the [NRL Leadership and Development in the Pacific Workshop](#) that was hosted by the Secretariat of the Pacific Community in 2015 and will be detailed in an upcoming In Brief.

Pacific Progress

The NRL Pasifika Cultural Engagement Program culturally empowers athletes, develops their leadership and coping skills, and informs them of important Pacific development issues. The program allows the NRL to respond to issues as they arise, and the challenge now is to anticipate future issues to design prevention programs. The targeted approach in identifying participants has its benefits and disadvantages. Participants have a vested interest in becoming 'cultural warriors' and are more likely to run similar programs for their clubs and local communities like the 'Leader of the Pac' program. On the other hand, some athletes who would like to participate are unable to do so because of club commitments and obligations. Most participants demonstrating leadership potential are also international representatives and are therefore committed to training and playing for most of the year. This makes finding time to support community projects difficult in the long term. For this reason it is often easier to engage recently retired players. Despite these challenges, as more Pasifika athletes participate in the program there will be a sustainable pipeline of athletes willing and able to be effective 'cultural warriors' for Pacific communities.

Author Notes

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Endnotes

1. The term Pasifika is used to include people both born in the Pacific as well as those with Pacific heritage born outside the Pacific.
2. National Rugby League 25/2/2015. Pasifika Players Demographics and Statistics, personal communication.

Reference

Murray, S. 2013. [Sports Diplomacy in the Australian Context: A Case Study of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade](#). *Sports Law eJournal*.

